**Ditch the textbooks, teach from newspapers instead**

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A small group of political Texans has again decided what textbooks will be used in our schools. Because Texas is a large market and the schoolbook business is so lucrative, details of their discussions and votes on issues such as evolution and current affairs reach The Des Moines Register. I cannot think of a worse way to write a textbook.  
  
I have a suggestion for Iowa schools: Don't buy those textbooks. Instead, buy local and state newspapers as reading material in sociology, history and literature courses. Buy paperback books from bookstores. Let our students read real news, in real time, and let them confront opinion pages and conflicting viewpoints.

Almost everyone predicts the death of newspapers as the web provides free news and free classified ads. It is most interesting that Google executives are well aware the death of newspapers will dry up the information pool that is so valuable for search engines like Google. Without reporters and writers, there will be little of interest left on the web. There is a further danger: Without actual responsible news on the web, the irresponsible bloggers will take over. Who wants to Google "Kennedy" and find 10,000 conspiracy theories?

For several years, Jennifer Lowery in the Iowa State University English Department and I in the Physics Department have taught a course combining physics and English that we call "Newspaper Physics." I teach almost all topics in physics each semester entirely from articles that appear in the daily newspaper, and the students write about physics. Most assignments are combined English-physics papers, including written interviews with physicists at ISU and Fermilab.

The same can be done in many other courses. For example, most newspaper articles on world events completely omit the background information that used to fill up the last 10 paragraphs of a good news article. A history teacher could assign a project: "Fill in the information that is missing from this article." There are opportunities too numerous to mention, but any article on Afghanistan might discuss the Soviet invasion and occupation, the Najibullah regime and the history of the Pashtun tribe. The class might even watch the semi-historical movie "Charlie Wilson's War," starring Tom Hanks.

I have used the birth and death announcements in the Register to provide plentiful data for discussions of binomial and Poisson statistics, and also to analyze and understand the fluctuations in numbers. Statistics is pretty simple (if you avoid the textbooks!). There are ample articles that touch on topics in biology and chemistry. One only has to look for them.  
  
This style of teaching would place more demands on teachers, and also on the students, but that is good. Buying subscriptions to newspapers, such as the Register and the New York Times, plus a local newspaper, is cheaper than buying these thick, overpriced, boring, anthology-like textbooks.

Additional benefits are that our students would start to discriminate information, critically compare two (probably both wrong) points of view, and learn to form their own informed opinions. These are essential abilities in the world today, and it is not too early to start.  
  
I travel the world a lot. Many countries have better and more vigorous schools (Korea, Taiwan, Germany, France, Japan), and they produce more engineers and successful college students. But I also find that no other culture is as willing to experiment with new techniques and ideas as the American culture. We are the innovators on the planet. We want to be first, so let's be first.

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